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## ABSTRACT

This study examined how one elementary school physical education teacher in Chicago (Illinois) influenced the status and perception of physical education and established an important niche for herself within the school community. The teacher's use of strict ritual and routine in structuring classes, as well as her formal, serious demeanor established her as an authority figure to be respected. The gym routine itself controlled students' behavior. The teacher also gained respect for physical education as a school subject by giving homework to students in fifth through eighth grades. The assignments assumed symbolic importance by expressing the conviction that the subject is an important part of the overall school curriculum. The teacher's insistence that her gym be respected and kept tidy was closely allied to her reputation as someone with the ability to be in control of events inside it. Student performance in an annual "gym show" also reinforced her reputation in the eyes of students, colleagues, and parents as a "good teacher." Playground and lunchroom duties further increased the teacher's visibility around school and provided opportunities for informal interactions with students and parents. This teacher illustrated teaching's complex moral aspect as she modeled care, consistency, respect, and the possibility of a better life. Contains seven references. (JB)

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GYM'S WORK TOO!" OBTAINING RESPECT FOR PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN AN  
URBAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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### *Introduction*

Historically, physical education has had marginal status as a subject area in the curriculum (Schempp, et al., 1993). Student learning outcomes in areas such as movement skills, sports skills and fitness, and affective processes are more difficult to measure and are treated as being of relatively low importance in comparison to the test scores that are the preoccupation of many classroom teachers, administrators, and school systems. In the past there has been little agreement about the mission and goals of physical education, and about the nature of its subject matter (Bain, 1990). However, recent initiatives to conceptualize what it means to be physically educated (National Association for School Physical Education, 1992), and to detail the qualities of effective teaching (Graham, 1992) represent attempts to improve the cultural images of physical educators (Rovegno, 1993) and to elevate the status of physical education as an integral part of a child's education in the eyes of the public, principals, and classroom teachers.

While these initiatives are laudable, their results have yet to be felt in the context of Fleming School, an elementary school located in a high-crime area on Chicago's south side.<sup>1</sup> Here physical education is generally perceived by students as a break from the classroom and a chance to unwind, and by some teachers as an unessential part of the curriculum where students are not engaged in learning, and which become little more than a harmless rationale for obtaining a welcome "prep" period.<sup>2</sup> Thus Mrs. Tracer, the physical education teacher, is faced with the challenge of ensuring that her subject is taken seriously.

After briefly describing the physical education program at Fleming School, I discuss several inter-related processes through which Mrs. Tracer obtains respect for herself and her

subject, and will show how her everyday interactions with her students inside the gym convey her expectations about how both she and her subject should be regarded. Then I will show how through her many additional roles she has carved out a reputation for herself as someone who is versatile and who can contribute in a meaningful way to the life of the school.

### PHYSICAL EDUCATION AT FLEMING SCHOOL

#### *1. The Priority of Order and Routine*

For most students at Fleming School, physical education class is a much anticipated and welcome break from the passivity and disinterest that characterizes much of their classroom experience. Students describe being "crammed up in the classroom," "tired of hearing the teacher talk," and "fed up with doin' work." As they complete the short journey from their classrooms and arrive in the hallway next to the gym, they appear to revel in the opportunity to talk, tease, joke, and move. Mrs. Tracer believes that gym class is "like an escape from their classroom work, from being in the classroom with a teacher that they don't get along with."

Mrs. Tracer addresses the challenge of getting the students to take her subject seriously as soon as they arrive at the gym for their weekly gym class. This ritual that accompanies every gym lesson represents one of the ways through which Mrs. Tracer obtains the students' respect.

When they arrive in the hallway outside the gym the boys and girls stand in separate lines and smile and joke with each other. However, when Mrs. Tracer opens

the gym door, enters the hallway, and stares at them they quickly end their conversations. The students are familiar with the routine. First, Mrs. Tracer tells the girls to enter the gym followed by the boys. They heed Mrs. Tracer's stern instruction, "Don't even cross that gym floor," and dutifully walk along the black perimeter line of the basketball court. The girls follow this line to the far half of the gym, while the boys stay in the nearer half. Then the students in each group hastily remove their top garments to reveal shorts and T-shirts and place their clothes on the wooden benches positioned along the edge of the gym. When they are dressed they sit on the black lines with their legs crossed and talk quietly. Often, in the rush to get changed, some clothes are left strewn on the floor. Mrs. Tracer noticing that her gym looks untidy, tells the offending students, "Get your clothes off the floor and on the bench."

At this point, the ritual proceeds in one of two ways, depending upon the age of the students. Kindergartners through fourth graders are told to "Stand!" and then "Pass!" and they walk in a military fashion around the black perimeter line until they reach the small red circle in the middle of the gym. When they are all standing around the circle, Mrs. Tracer says sharply, "Sit!" and then takes roll. After roll is completed, Mrs. Tracer typically leads the students through a calisthenic-type warm-up and then follows with a selection of recreation games, catching games, elimination games, and relays.

However, the older classes observe a different routine, largely because units of team games such as volleyball, soccer, floor hockey, and flag football necessitate that students be organized into squads. My observation continues:

While the students finish changing, Mrs. Tracer walks across to the table and flips through her class lists. Having found the correct list, she walks towards the students and shouts "Squads!" The students jump up, walk quickly to one end of the gym and stand in four lines. Mrs. Tracer positions herself in front of the class, pauses, and glares at the lines for a moment. Her petiteness (she is less than five feet tall) is in stark contrast to some of her students. However, her presence is very powerful and there is silence as she says, "Sit," and the students sink to the floor. The students seem to expect to be told what to do and do not question anything.

As she takes the roll Mrs. Tracer notices students who are not wearing their gym uniform and says, "You already got an F, there is no excuse. You need a gym

uniform to compete. If you can spend \$25 on gym shoes, you can buy a uniform for \$10."

Often Mrs. Tracer launches into an assertive speech containing her expectations for gym class: the students must wear the correct uniform, they must not chew gum, and girls should not wear fingernail polish or earrings.

The students listen intently and appear to realize the seriousness with which Mrs. Tracer treats her job. She continues:

Don't knock my bulletin boards. You wear your whole outfit. [pause] You missing your gym shoes I'm going to check it off. [pause] Everyone starts with an A then you lose marks. Tell your mother why. [pause] If your teacher keeps you back in class in gym, I'm going to check it off. Teachers aren't supposed to do it but they do. I mark you absent. [pause] Mr. Crutchfield and Mr. Harris [the students' classroom teachers] not playing with you. If I were you I would work hard [in the classroom].

This ritual helps set a tone of seriousness of purpose about why students attend PE in the first place. It makes clear Mrs. Tracer's expectations about what it means to be prepared for PE and how to conduct oneself properly. The ritual takes about 15 minutes, or almost 38% of class time. Then the classes perform a warm-up and sometimes a drill, and then play team games.

Commenting about this series of events, Mrs. Tracer says, "You gotta get them all calmed down before they come in," and show them that "You're not gonna run into the gym and think you gonna control me." If for any reason students do not conform to her expectations she has no hesitation in preventing them from having their physical education class. On one occasion, the eighth grade students' boisterous arrival at the gym results in them standing in the hallway for their 40 minute physical education period listening to Mrs. Tracer's admonitions. "You won't be playin'" she says, "until you stop acting the fool and get yourselves straightened out."

The principal believes that the students "fall into the routine very quickly and very easily. Kids love structure and if they see [that] a teacher means business and has a structure and expects them to fit into it, they usually love doing it." Former students acknowledge the success of Mrs. Tracer's gym organization. Elizabeth says, "They think that by her bein' short they can run over her, but she showed them can't nobody run her over"; while Juanita says, "'Cause it's her classroom she has to have it under control."

During interviews second graders drew pictures of the gym and supplemented these with descriptions. Both drawings and descriptions are dominated by the red and black lines which reflects the prominence of the floor lines in the gym routine. Two second grade boys, Earnest and Ben talk about their drawings<sup>3</sup>:

- Earnest: When we come in she tell us to-  
 Ben: [ Line up straight and don't talk.  
 Earnest: Yeah. [Then] she'll tell us to take our clothes off if we have gym clothes, and then-  
 Ben: [ You'll get an F if you don't... She want us to walk straight to that thing in the middle [the red circle].  
 Earnest: [We sit in the circle] because she gots to know if you have your proper gym clothes on.  
 Ben: Like a gym uniform, and like blue shorts and white T shirts, or white socks, and like the green Fleming School gym uniform... They have to wear shorts and T shirts, white socks, so they won't get an F.  
 Earnest: First she start from the boys and then she go to the girls, and whoever doesn't have they gym shorts and a T shirt on, they will get an F.  
 Ben: She ask them why she doesn't have a shirt. Sometimes they tell her they gym uniforms is dirty.

Margaret and Adele, two second grade girls, explain their drawings and recount a similar story:

- Margaret: You have to be good, and you have to dress every Tuesday [for gym class].  
 Adele: And you have to obey Miss Tracer and you gotta obey the rules.  
 Margaret: And sit on the black lines.

- Adele: And you gotta do everythin' what she says otherwise you in big trouble. You might get an F.
- Margaret: She tell us to take off our shoes if we have on street shoes and if we have on our gym shoes she tell us to go in. Then we get undressed and then sit on the black line.
- Adele: [Explaining her drawing] It's the whole floor, and they're the benches, and there's me in my gym suit while I'm undressing.
- Nick: And you've got a smiling face. Does that mean that you like gym?
- Adele: Nods [yes].

In the following conversation, two eighth grade students, Dante and Mary, give their views about being in squads:

- Nick: How do you feel about being in a squad?
- Mary: That's where everybody can show their talent, you all come together as one. Different squads will try to compete each other by trying to win.
- Nick: Do you think kids like being in squads?
- Mary: I do.
- Dante: I do too.
- Mary: That's order.
- Nick: What do you mean by order?
- Mary: As in a classroom. You sit in different seats.
- Nick: So being in squads is like being in a classroom?
- Mary: It's like individual groups. She don't put all girls in one group, she mix them up and she put certain people in certain groups so that you have abilities to win and to have strategies in sports.

Parents also respect Mrs. Tracer's efforts to ensure that her subject is taken seriously. Mr. Thompson says, "A lot of kids wanna run all over the place [in gym], but when Miss Tracer speaks it's like everybody listens because she has that type of [presence], she becomes a god." Mrs. Roberts, a parent, sees gym class as an activity with a purpose:

They don't go to gym and act crazy like they want. They go for a reason, to do exercise first, and then maybe have a fun time later. One child of mine says that Mrs. Tracer is very mean and that she will never let her do nothin'. That's because she doesn't let her do exactly what she wants. She had to go about it a certain way, both exercisin' and playin' games.

A large part of the students' grades are based on whether they are dressed for gym, and Mrs. Tracer's insistence that students be properly prepared helps to secure both their obedience and their respect for herself and her subject. As Mary, an eighth grade girl says, "Some people think gym is for us to be excused from class, but if you don't come dressed you get an F and that's on your report card." Mrs. English, a fourth grade teacher says, "They know they can't come and do anything they wanna do and act anyway they wanna act, dress anyway they wanna dress."

Parents hear about Mrs. Tracer's routine through their children, particularly the need for uniform in gym class. As Mrs. Roberts says,

The kids say, "Miss Tracer was mad 'cause we didn't have the gym uniform." She does something to these kids because my kids found all of their gym uniforms. She's an inspiration to them. I don't know if it got to do with her size, her mouth, or what, but my kids love her... The love and scaredness work together. It's not fear, it's more like respect, yeah. They know the look in her face when today is going to be a easy day, or today is going to be a fun day, or we gonna work today. They know.

Mr. Miller, a parent says,

My son came home and said "My gym teacher said we got to wear shorts, we can't wear jeans." I said, "Well if Miss Tracer said that's what you have to do, that's what you have to do."

Such accounts serve to both ground and enhance Mrs. Tracer's reputation as a strict teacher and make up for the fact that like most teachers she has no visible product to show for her teaching efforts, no immediate evidence of enduring learning. Students and their parents are thankful for the different facets of Mrs. Tracer's gym routine because it gives the children a sense of control and security to know what is coming. They also value her consistent and firm discipline style because it makes the gym a safe, secure, and predictable

environment for them. The routine, the boundaries, the strong expectations are clear and make sense to the students, and these features may not be present in many of these children's lives. Mamie, an eighth grade girl, explains:

In that gym they gotta respect her. [If] they gonna act like they rather be rude she can handle them. Most people don't give their teachers no respect, but in gym they give Miss Tracer more respect than they give the principal 'cause they know she'll get on them. When she say somethin' they gonna do it, 'cause they know they gotta give her that respect.

In gym class, students can let loose from the confines of the classroom and enjoy a sense of freedom which they do not experience in other aspects of their school lives. Although the gym routine places many restrictions on them from the time they arrive outside the gym until the time they leave, the students appreciate having limits placed on their behavior and simply comply. David, an eighth grade boy says, "She treat it like a classroom 'cause you gotta be quiet in there." The gym routine controls the students' behavior and helps them to know what is expected of them and keeps them from getting in trouble. I can attest to the difficulties some of the students present, but discipline is never really an issue in Mrs. Tracer's gym, rather it is taken for granted by the students. The children know she expects them to behave and, largely, they do.

## 2. *Gym Homework*

Another way through which Mrs. Tracer obtains respect for her subject is by giving homework to students in the fifth through eighth grades. Just before dismissing each class, Mrs. Tracer hands out worksheets containing blanks to be filled in with short answers to questions about game rules, game terms, and strategy. She grades the worksheets and returns them to the students the following week, together with a new worksheet to be

completed. Mrs. Tracer knows that the students do not view gym as seriously as they view academic school subjects, but her homework shows them that gym class is "not just play, you have to read for PE like you have to read for your teacher in the classroom, and understand what's happening." Although the worksheets reduce the sports to their simplest possible form, they are given to the students "so they understand that [gym's] work too."

She adds,

Gym has somethin' to do with the language arts, it have somethin' to do with math. You gotta know what certain words mean to move. You gotta know how to be creative, that's where your reading comes in.

Homework assumes an important symbolic dimension by enabling Mrs Tracer to express her conviction that her subject is an important part of the overall school curriculum, and while at first the students were perplexed on receiving homework from her, they soon accept it as a part of gym class. Mrs. Tracer regards the homework as very important and berates students who forget to turn it in. On one occasion when many students in a seventh grade class did not turn in their homework she escorted them back to their classroom and made them work on the homework for the whole period. Her explanation of her actions shows that she expects them to fulfill their obligations to work before she fulfills her obligation to let them play:

They know they made me mad and upset. If I assign work you do it. They thought they were gonna come in [the gym] and play and they didn't do their homework. I know you know how to play and so? But you didn't do the work, and so we gotta go in the classroom.

Mrs. Tracer believes that her actions ensure that the students conform to her wishes:

"If I had let them go today, next week it would have been worse," and parents and classroom teachers recognize that the importance that she attaches to homework reflects the seriousness

with which she takes her subject. According to Miss Gilmore, a first grade teacher, Mrs. Tracer thinks that gym "is just as serious as reading, writing, and everything else during the day." Miss Smith, a seventh grade teacher says, "They've done written work and also physical activities, and I like the way Mrs. Tracer has it set up so that gym's both play and work." Mrs. Murray, a parent, also supports Mrs. Tracer's efforts. She says, "I think it's great the way she has them doin' paperwork besides just having physical education."

Giving homework enables Mrs. Tracer to see a different side of the students, a side separate from that which is seen in the gym, pertaining to their strengths and weaknesses in the classroom. She explains that for some students, this exposure may be embarrassing:

One thing they don't want you to know is about academics. You would think [by] the way they behave in the gym and the way they participate they were the smartest kids in the world. They are good [in gym] 'cause they like what they doin', but they do not want you to know that they cannot function to their fullest in the classroom and can't read and put sentences in order... They are truly embarrassed.

Her comment suggests that the students do not feel good about themselves in relation to the academic content of the school and more particularly as readers and writers. Also it lends support to the notion that students value gym class not only for the absence of classroom pressures to get things right, but also for providing them with experiences that are more related to their immediate needs and interests.

### 3. *Coeducational Gym*

Mrs. Tracer is adamant that her gym program should be coeducational at all times. She has been told that prior to her arrival four years ago it was not uncommon for the girls to be jumping rope in the hallway outside the gym while the boys played basketball inside. The remnants of this philosophy are still apparent. For example, on one occasion just before

the eighth grade class is due to arrive at the gym, Mr. Thomas, the school security guard, comes into the gym and asks Mrs. Tracer whether he can take the boys on to the playground to play football. Mrs. Tracer is horrified at this suggestion and says firmly, "No, this ain't free gym, it is a co-ed program." Mr. Thomas accepts her comment without any argument, apologizes for asking, and leaves.

By dismissing Mr. Thomas' request, Mrs. Tracer ensures that her view of gym being a coeducational activity is conveyed in the strongest way possible. She believes that "The boys and girls have to do the same thing, you've got some girls that are just as strong as the boys and some boys that are just as meek and weak as the girls." In all the games and sports in the gym, she ensures that teams contain equal number of boys and girls. Students appreciate Mrs. Tracer's attempts to provide gender equality. Mary says, "She don't put all girls in one group, she mix them up so that you have [different] abilities to win and to have strategies in sports."

The students do not dispute Mrs. Tracer's wishes to provide equal opportunity in her gym by mixing boys and girls, and in most gym classes one will see the same high level of involvement from all students, regardless of gender or ability level. However, the nature of competitive activities as they unfold in her gym means that her good intentions are not always realized. For example, on occasions during games of soccer and floor hockey, Mrs. Tracer does not seek to eliminate the tendency of certain boys to exploit the numerous opportunities to pass the ball to other boys whom they consider more skilled than the other boys and girls on their team. Similarly in volleyball, she does not dissuade students when they accumulate valuable points by serving to a weak player on the opposing team. These

situations are regarded both by Mrs. Tracer and the students as one of the natural outcomes of competition. As David says, "I have no problems [with having girls on my team] as long as they are the girls who can play," and as this conversation between Earnest and Ben, two second grade boys suggests, boys and girls do grate against each other at times:

- Ben: The girls be thinkin' that they be better than us.  
 Earnest: Yeah, because one time Miss Tracer was playin' this [catching] game. She throw the ball and you drop it, the girls was laughin' at us.  
 Ben: Sometimes we laugh at them back to get them mad for laughin' at us.  
 Nick: Do the boys and girls get on OK in the gym?  
 Ben: No.  
 Nick: Why not?  
 Earnest: The girls act like sissies.

Furthermore, occasionally Mrs. Tracer's own preconceptions about gender differences emerge. For example: when introducing a basketball relay to second graders she tells the girls, "You are going to have problems with this. You [girls] can skip but you can't dribble." Also, while she tries to ensure that girls have equal opportunities in her gym, she believes that the boys get more "hyped up" than girls for competition. She says,

When it's time for sports they [the boys] don't see girls. It's like nothin' matters. They don't even see their mothers at this point. Girls are too busy being Miss Prissy and want boys lookin' at what they have got on and how they cute in it... They don't like the sweat and they feel that "I'm not gonna do this, that's for the boys, I've got other things I can do, like how I look today, or what boy I'm gonna get to look at me today. If I sweat and get myself all musky, my hair gets all messed up, I won't be able to get him."

Mrs. Cooper, a sixth grade teacher, agrees saying, "The boys definitely look forward to [gym] more than the girls. For some reason the boys are more athletically inclined, they like that physical contact, they like the competition more than the girls do." While this may be true for some of the girls it applies to some boys too, and many girls get very involved in competitive activities and show high levels of emotion and intensity.

On the few occasions when Mrs. Tracer gives the students "free gym," all the boys play basketball, while girls, with a few exceptions, practice their intricate jump rope routines. Both activities are taken very seriously. Occasionally certain girls play basketball with some of the weaker boys or among themselves, but boys never jump rope except when flirting, and only then very briefly. However, the following conversation between Margaret and Adele, two second grade girls, reveals that among the younger children there is some confusion about the "proper" sports for boys and girls:

- Adele: Double dutch [jump rope] is for girls to do to exercise their legs and basketball for boys to exercise their hands, legs, and body.  
 Nick: So is basketball for boys and double dutch for girls?  
 Adele: Yes.  
 Margaret: No, sometimes boys jump double dutch, sometimes girls-  
 Adele: [ Play basketball.  
 Nick: So it's not just one for boys and one for girls.  
 Adele: uh uh [No].  
 Margaret: uh uh [No].

#### 4. *The Content of the Gym Program*

Mrs. Tracer's insistence that students learn skills and participate in a variety of activities contributes to the respect that people in the school accord her. For example, Mrs. Murray, a parent says,

She's doin' things like soccer and volleyball and other activities to broaden the child's horizons. Parents don't have the access to places for those kids to learn that. If all they do is play rope or run around the gym then they don't know that there's other things out there that they might be able to get into. If she didn't have it in gym there is a possibility that they would never have it in life.

Miss Gilmore says, "I did not view gym as important until I was able to observe Miss Tracer and see that she's really doing something with these kids," while Mrs. English, says, "I have visited the gym and I know that it's more than just a break." Students who have

been to other schools prior to coming to Fleming regard Mrs. Tracer's program as more structured than their previous gym experience because they are taught a variety of activities. For example, Katrina, a fifth grade girl, says that at her previous school, "We didn't have stuff like we have at this school. We didn't have double-dutch contests, [the gym teacher] didn't teach us, he just gave us ropes and stuff and let us play." Robert remembers that at his previous school "we could do anything we want to. [The gym teacher] just let us go in and get the balls." His present gym experience is much better because "Here we have special activities. Like we doin' soccer, then we doin' floor hockey, then we on volleyball, and she teach us this."

In the following discussion Candice, an eighth grade girl, also stresses the-structured nature of Mrs. Tracer's program:

- Candice: It's [the gym program] organized.  
 Nick: What do you mean by organized?  
 Candice: It's like she won't have to worry about nothin' bein' mixed up because she know what she be doin' 'cause she have it in order.  
 Nick: What does she have in order?  
 Candice: The way she teach us. Like she has stuff probably marked down somewhere what we gonna do on this day.  
 Nick: So she knows what she's doin' each week?  
 Candice: Yeah, like a lesson plan like teachers write out what they do like who gonna play volleyball and I'm gonna give them a worksheet, so she know what she gonna do before we get there. She ain't like the [previous] gym teacher, Miss Gray. She would stand there for five or ten minutes [until] she would think of somethin' that we had to do.

Former students also appreciate Mrs. Tracer's efforts. Several refer to Mrs. Tracer's program in relation to their high school gym experience. Juanita, a former student says, "She was teachin' us what we have to know in high school 'cause all the activities we did in there we are doin' in high school." Quinnette, a former student says, "She didn't exactly

come out and tell us what we was gonna do in high school but showin' us and teachin' us the activities was just like preparing us for gym in high school." Elizabeth also believes that participating in the activities prepared her for high school:

[When] we was playin' volleyball [at Fleming] I didn't know nothin'. I know how to hit the ball but not like Miss Tracer was doin'. When I got to high school they were showin' us and I already knew it, so it was easy to play volleyball. I never played softball until I got in Miss Tracer's room. We played softball outside and when I got to high school we played softball.

However, for these students the high school physical education experience is not as positive as it was at Fleming. When they return to Fleming to visit Mrs. Tracer they often tell her about their high school physical education programs, and the negativity of their accounts serves to reinforce her efforts at Fleming. Mrs. Tracer says that the students tell her that they don't have to be dressed, they can chew gum, they can bring radios, and tend only to play basketball. Elizabeth says,

When we was here it was fun. Miss Tracer will try to teach you. In high school it's boring bein' in gym... You do a little exercise, not the exercises Miss Tracer used to do, we did exercises with Miss Tracer. They let you do a couple of jumpin' jacks, run around if you feel like it, they don't try to make you. [They say], "Do a couple of push ups," [but] you don't even have to do it [and] some kids just be layin' on the floor. [If] you laid on the floor with Miss Tracer, that would be the time to get into it with her. Then they blow the whistle and you run and get the [basket]ball and start playin'. They just sit back and let you play basketball. You could do that at home.

In comparison to their high school experience, Mrs. Tracer's gym program is appreciated by former students. Elizabeth says,

[She] teach you activities. Not just let you run around and play. She will let us play with the hockey sticks and after we play a game or two, she'll let us have free gym, that's run around. But with Miss Tracer it was like you learn then you have your free time.

Katrina talks about gym in relation to her future as a high school student. She says, "When we go to high school we wouldn't know what they be doin'." David agrees saying,

In high school you gonna have to take what she givin' us now, like hockey and soccer. So she gettin' us prepared... Maybe when I get to high school I might pick one of those activities and wanna play it. They might ask you, "Where you learn how to play this game?" [I would tell them] "At my old school I had a good teacher teach me."

### *5. The Gym Appearance*

Mrs. Tracer's attempts to maintain and improve the appearance of her gym is another way she obtains respect, and as she says, only half in jest, "I'm graded on this." At one end of the gym is a notice board on which she displays seasonal messages. In September, one half of the board is covered by a football helmet and football and the words, "Let's kick off a winning school year." On the other half there are three skittles, a ball, and the slogan, "Good sportsmanship is right down our alley." In October, Halloween pumpkins and witches adorn the board, followed by turkeys at Thanksgiving, Christmas boxes in December, Valentine's hearts in February and Easter bunnies in March. She also hangs posters along the side of the gym that deal with issues as diverse as drugs, the importance of breakfast, health and hygiene, AIDS, and different sports. Mrs. Tracer says, "They [the students] can read about what they don't know on the posters, the different athletes, the current events." She believes that "A lot of kids don't know anything about the athletes today or yesterday, or what's going on [in sports] now." It is not unusual for students to ask her from where she has obtained a certain poster so that they can get one for their bedrooms.

As the opening vignette illustrated, Mrs. Tracer constantly and consistently enforces rules designed to keep the gym clean. Students are often exhorted to "Take those street shoes off!" "Throw that gum away!" and "Get those clothes off the floor and on the bench!" Ben comments about her rules: "If you have gym shoes on she won't have no scratches on the floor. If scratches end up on the floor [it] won't look nice anymore." Mamie feels that Mrs. Tracer regards her gym as her classroom because "She don't have you do nothin' in the gym that you don't do up in your classroom." Katrina believes that students respect the gym room "'cause Miss Tracer get on our case if we didn't."

Mrs. Tracer's insistence that her gym be respected and kept tidy is closely allied to her reputation as someone with the ability to be in control of events inside it. Mr. Winfrey, a parent and also a janitor at Fleming says, "Mrs. Tracer has got control over her gym. She treat it like it's part of something she own. She treat it with respect and she would like others to do the same." Former students remember Mrs. Tracer as being fastidious about her gym. Sofia says, "She take it real serious, not like a classroom because most classrooms be all junky and you can walk in with street shoes. With Mrs. Tracer it always be so clean." Juanita says, "That's her classroom so she have to control it... It's always clean. She'd have a fit if she saw a piece of paper on the floor."

Several students comment about the appearance of the gym. Katrina believes that "She try to make the gym look pretty and she want to keep our floor clean like it was her house. She wouldn't want nobody to come in and see what an ugly gym it was." David says that while students sometimes deface notice boards around the school, "they don't mess with stuff in there." He remembers experiencing the full wrath of Mrs. Tracer:

The basketball team left [the gym] in a wreck, and she called us down to clean it up. She was like, "If you're gonna do your house like this, don't do it to the gym room. If you ain't gonna do [leave] your room like this, don't do the [gym] room like this. 'Cause you have gotta come in here every week and I know you don't want no other class leavin' it in a wreck would you?"

#### 6. *The Gym Show*

Another way that Mrs. Tracer obtains respect is through her annual gym show which shows faculty and parents what students accomplish in gym class. Prior to becoming a teacher, Mrs. Tracer worked as a dancer entertaining US troops throughout South-East Asia during the Vietnam War, and her gym shows allow her the opportunity to relive her dream. She says,

When I first came here, I told [the administrators] that in every school I have been in I put on a gym show. I love to put on a show. I love to let [the students] show themselves off to their parents and whoever else comes and watches them.

While Mrs. Tracer is supposed to follow the physical education curriculum guide, after the Spring break regular activities are suspended in order that she can direct each class' preparations for the upcoming gym show. She views the gym show as a major part of the curriculum, and even incorporates students' performances into their final gym grade. The gym show is an opportunity not only for the students to perform in front of an audience, but also for their teacher to show others in the school what she has been working on throughout the year. The students' performances help to reinforce her reputation in the eyes of students, colleagues, and parents as a "good teacher."<sup>4</sup>

Miss Gilmore acknowledges that the gym show enabled her "to see what was being done with the kids." The principal says, "Teachers are pleasantly surprised when gym show time rolls around," and that "The first gym show probably opened more eyes of staff

members [regarding] what the gym program is all about." He believes that the teachers support Mrs. Tracer "a lot more than they would someone throwing the ball out" and that "It makes for a different kind of relationship." The principal's sentiments are supported by the comments of Mrs. English who says,

The first year that I came [to Fleming] was the first time that I had ever seen a gym show of the quality that it was. I've seen the results of gym classes at the gym show and I was real impressed with that.

Mrs. Samuels, a second grade teacher, comments about the gym show. She says,

[The gym show] gives the students an opportunity to see what they can accomplish through working together. This is something that you can put together and feel good about because you put all your energy into it. It's different from what the children are used to, things they wouldn't be exposed to ordinarily like square dancing and other types of dancing.

Students are also aware of the importance of the gym show as can be seen in this conversation with Sofia, a former student:

Nick: Tell me a little about the gym show.  
Sofia: We all worked hard to make it successful.  
Nick: Why does Mrs. Tracer have a gym show?  
Sofia: To show everybody what we learned in gym.

The gym show is also popular with parents. Ms. Daniels says, "I love it because it shows parents that these kids can do more than just play basketball and soccer. They can put a little show on for you." Mrs. Tracer believes that the gym show provides her with credibility because "It shows my ability and what I've been doin' for the whole year." In the absence of a formal evaluation, the gym show plays a large role in the official assessment by Fleming's administration of Mrs. Tracer's teaching. Mr. Hopkins, the assistant principal says,

The gym show is a tremendous opportunity as a culminating activity to see what's been done during the year, and is very impressive. When I see the [kids] performing things that require a lot of practice and discipline, that gives me an idea of what must be going on in the class, inside the gymnasium. It's a special type of person that can pull that out of these kids, and she's been able to do it.

#### 7. *Mrs Tracer's Additional Roles Outside the Gym*

In addition to teaching, Mrs. Tracer undertakes playground and lunchroom duties, which further increase her visibility around the school. She has barely missed a day's school at Fleming and parents, who walk their children to school each morning often greet her as she undertakes playground duty. They may see her standing outside the school gates hustling late-comers and speaking sternly to children who consistently arrive late. They may notice that younger children often give her a hug and ask whether the school's gym uniform has arrived or when cheerleading practice is taking place. They may be aware that her arrival on the playground signifies the beginning of the school day and therefore a signal that it is time for girls to end their games of double-dutch and boys to suspend their impromptu games of chase. On occasions they may see her forcefully intervene in arguments that have the potential to erupt into fights. They may observe the children's compliance to her command that they form lines ready for collection by their home-room teachers, and they may notice that as they stand in their lines many of the children's eyes are fixed on Mrs. Tracer.

Sometimes Mrs. Tracer will stop for brief conversations with parents as she performs her playground duties. In these conversations, she may convey her concerns about a child's progress or attitude in school. For example, on one occasion Mrs. Tracer informs a mother that her child did not have gym uniform for the previous day's gym lesson. The mother tells her that she was sick but that her daughter should have known where her clean gym uniform

was in the house. She adds, "You should have hollered at her and given her one of those looks of yours, then she wouldn't forget it ever again." Mrs. Tracer smiles and being aware of her capacity as a strict teacher says, "I didn't want to reduce her to tears!" During an interview Katrina describes how her mother told her that she had talked to Mrs. Tracer and "She [Mrs. Tracer] says you don't be actin' right in gym."

At other times during these conversations parents share details of their lives, struggles, and victories with Mrs. Tracer who herself is a single parent with two young children. For example, a mother confides with her about the difficulties of bringing up a son in a community like Walton. Drawing on her own experience, Mrs. Tracer shares a common understanding saying, "Mothers have to look out for their sons before somebody else does," and they discuss the need to steer their sons away from the temptations of gangs, drugs, peer pressure not to overly achieve in school, and the attraction of girls. These sharing conversations sustain these women and make them feel more human and valued, and help Mrs. Tracer to engender a relationship with them that is based on a mutual recognition of and identification with similar struggles and sacrifices. As Mrs. Roberts says, "They know her in ways other than gym, as a friend," and help to explain why she has a reputation among parents as a teacher who "you can talk to about your problems and stuff."

Mrs. Tracer undertakes a 30 minute lunchroom duty each day, during which about 100 hundred third and fourth graders eat lunch in a room barely larger than a classroom. Her stern orchestration of events resembles her approach to her teaching. It is one dominated by student conformity to her directions, and order and routine. Students expect to be told by Mrs. Tracer where to sit and not to talk while eating and those who do not

comply with her rules are firmly censured -- "If I catch you talkin' I will tan your behind!" - and then moved to another seat. Although the lunchroom is a different teaching setting, Mrs. Tracer's demands regarding students' conduct reinforce what they experience in the gym, and as Katrina says, "In the lunchroom, it's just like she in the gym, she want nobody talkin', she want you to eat." When they have finished their meals Mrs. Tracer calls out students by tables to dispose of their food, and her appointed monitors ensure that trays are stored tidily and uneaten food is discarded in the appropriate receptacles.

Her system ensures that the lunch period runs smoothly and both the kitchen staff and parents are appreciative of the calm atmosphere that it engenders. On the day after a school trip which Mrs. Tracer escorted, she is informed by the kitchen staff that "Yesterday was pandemonium" without her in the lunchroom. On an occasion early in the school year a parent comments approvingly of Mrs. Tracer's direction of the lunchroom. She says, "See how quiet it is, you'll hear a pin drop!" and when she notices Mrs. Tracer telling her daughter to stop talking she says, "You put my daughter over there, she talkin' so hard!"

Mrs. Tracer also organizes events such as a turkey run at Thanksgiving, sock hops for older students at Halloween, Christmas, Valentine's Day, and Easter, and annual basketball "hot-shots" and jump rope contests. Although these events take place during the school day she refers to them as "extra-curricular activities" and says, "I do it because they need it, it's a social need to respect each other and socialize with each other." These events are appreciated by students, and as Katrina says simply, "Sock hops, double-dutch and basketball contests in the gym room makes stuff fun for us."

Sock hops show Mrs. Tracer both at her most business-like and her most outgoing. For example, at the Halloween sock hop she charges students 50 cents for admittance and insists that they wear gym shoes. However, she wears a gorilla suit and towards the end of the afternoon performs a sophisticated dance routine to Michael Jackson's song "Thriller" with a female colleague, a female student, and two female parents. The students are enthralled by the routine and cheer and clap as the performers end their routine and leave the gym. On their return Mrs. Tracer laughingly says to the audience, "I hope that you liked our little show," and then almost immediately returns to her role as organizer by telling the students that they have five minutes of dancing time remaining. Five minutes later, Mrs. Tracer grabs the microphone and first tells them to sit down and then organizes the students' departure from the gym one class at a time, starting with the fourth graders and ending with the eighth graders. This process takes a further five minutes and her calming yet deliberate manner produces a very civilized response from the students who exit in an orderly fashion.

Mrs. Tracer is also appreciated for her role as the mistress of ceremonies for assemblies, talent shows, and pep rallies and as the following vignette of a pep rally illustrates, she incorporates all her theatrical and show skills into this role:

Pep rallies take place in the auditorium before important basketball games. "Are we ready for the pep rally?" Mrs. Tracer shouts into the microphone. Although the auditorium is packed, at first the children's reply is rather muted and she says, "I don't hear you!" This procures the desired response and the students cheer and clap loudly as the cheerleaders dance to music piped through the loudspeakers. She does the same for the pompon girls and dances with them by moving her body to the music. The audience watches admiringly. After each of the basketball players has been introduced individually the team is joined by the cheerleaders and pompon girls on the stage and Mrs. Tracer leads them in chants by spelling out, "V-I-C-T-O-R-Y, victory, victory, that's our cry!" and S-U-P-E-R-S-T-A-R-S! What does it spell? Superstars. K-I-L-L, kill we will!" These cries whip the audience and performers into a frenzy.

Finally Mrs. Tracer invites teachers and parents down to the stage to sing the school song, and soon the auditorium is filled by a sea of voices. At the song's conclusion she tells the younger students that they are going to be the next cheerleaders, pompon girls, and basketball players and then dismisses each class one at a time. "Pay attention as you walk through that door," she shouts as the students leave the auditorium, talking excitedly.

In these events, the students see an alternative side to the strict, stern teacher: they see a fun, out-going person who provides something that helps instill pride both in themselves and in the school; they see a person who revels in putting on a show, and they cannot fail to be aware of her talents in dance and the performing arts.

The principal believes that students see Mrs. Tracer as someone who performs many different roles around the school. He says,

[They] see Mrs. Tracer MC-ing the talent show, at assemblies, in the gym program, and outside. Kids see [her] in different lights with different hats, and I think that they blend them together to form a composite.

### *Conclusion*

In addition to analyzing the Fleming community's beliefs about physical education classes, this paper shows how features of Mrs. Tracer daily work render her an effective teacher in this tough, inner-city school. Knowing how a reputation for effectiveness is obtained and legitimated in schools where children can and often do deny adults the right to control them may be valuable knowledge for teachers who are presently teaching in such schools, for those who may be contemplating teaching in such settings in the future, and for those who work with both pre-service and in-service teachers.

Because the gym is located next to the lunchroom, students, parents, classroom teachers, and administrators have direct access to aspects of Mrs. Tracer's practice. In the hallway, they observe her strong presence and business-like demeanor as she insists that

students stand silently in a line if necessary for several minutes before they enter the gym in a quiet, orderly fashion. Such observations of a small but self-confident person commanding respect of and controlling strictly disciplined and mannerly students present an impressive image of authority and obedience. They heighten Mrs. Tracer's visibility as a strict no-nonsense teacher who is providing the discipline that these students are not getting at home.

As people at Fleming pass the gym, they cannot fail to hear Mrs. Tracer shouting instructions as well as the students' yells and cheers of excitement and enthusiasm as they take part in games during gym class. They may witness the more informal interactions that often take place between Mrs. Tracer and her students as they leave the gym at the end of a lesson. Again, the image is of someone performing a role that is engaging the children and is valued by them, and of something that both parties care about.

In addition to her teaching duties, Mrs. Tracer performs several other roles in the school, which result in her gaining much attention and praise, and provide her with a degree of status that surpasses that given to her as a physical education teacher. Through these roles, Mrs. Tracer ensures that she is a highly visible participant in the processes that give meaning and purpose to the established practices and patterns of daily school life. Teachers at Fleming are expected to establish themselves as authority figures over students and their status is measured as much by their ability to control students as in matters concerning classroom instruction. While Mrs. Tracer amply demonstrates the power and authority she holds over students to those outside the classroom, the emphasis on student control and meeting the children's social and emotional needs tends to supplant the importance of subject knowledge and serves to further marginalize the subject matter of physical education

(Schempp, et al., 1993). Consequently, while there is often minimal interest and respect given to her subject matter by many members of the school community, Mrs. Tracer is held in high esteem more for her skill in controlling students than for expertise as a physical education specialist.

However, the educational and moral significance of Mrs. Tracer's practice extends beyond what is visible as she performs her daily duties. She is trying to serve specific ends: she is teaching the students from the point of where they are at now; they have "unstable lives" and she demands respect and in return feeds them a rich diet of structure, order, enjoyment, and, in some respects, success. Her practice reminds us that teaching is a complex moral enterprise. In addition to being a strict, no-nonsense disciplinarian, Mrs. Tracer models care, consistency, respect, and the possibility of a better life. By probing beneath the surface of her practice we have the opportunity to see teaching not as a technical enterprise devoid of context, but as being intricately connected to the school setting and the lives of the people in it.

## Notes

Fleming School is an elementary school serving approximately 600 students in Walton, an African-American neighborhood in a Midwestern city. The city's rate of violent crime was fourth in the United States in 1992, and according to local police statistics, Walton district was the fourth most violent in the city that year with a rate of 50.7 violent crimes for every 1,000 residents. Gangs fight over the control of the sales of crack cocaine in the neighborhood, and during one month in 1992 there were 74 homicides within three miles of the school, a record for the city. The student population at Fleming is 100% Black, and 97% of students come from low-income families according to the most recent free lunch count. Eleven per cent (11%) of the students in grades two through eight score at or above the national norm in reading, and twenty-one per-cent (21%) score at or above the national norm in math. By the eighth grade, the average reading score is at the fifth grade level. The School Improvement Plan refers to the high rates of discipline problems at Fleming, and states that teacher morale as well as the instructional program are affected by the high incidence of recurring discipline problems. Many of the students who exhibit these behaviors are identified as high-risk students. The Plan mentions that low self-esteem and student alienation are also reflected in the conduct of students on a daily basis, and states that teachers report that a lack of motivation is a problem with many students.

From 1990-94 I was a research assistant at Fleming School for a school-university collaboration project, and assisted in the physical education department, ran a before-school soccer program, and worked with classroom teachers in their classrooms. My initial interest in the practice of Mrs. Tracer, the physical education teacher, developed into a research enterprise (Cutforth, 1994; Cutforth, in press), and for three full days per week throughout the 1992-93 school year, I systematically observed 84 physical education lessons and conducted 33 interviews with Mrs. Tracer, students and former students, classroom teachers, administrators, and parents.

The quotations are my interpretation of interview dialogue, which I transcribed for analysis. Although the dialect spellings remain largely intact, I readily appreciate that interview transcripts do not capture what the words sound like, nor do they provide the rhythms, stress, pitch, and intonation. My attention to diction, metaphor, and syntax -- whether in direct quotations or in paraphrases of people's thoughts -- is intended to convey the power and beauty of Black speech and lived experiences of the speakers. The reader is referred to the works of Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker, Earnest Gaines, and others for more advanced and sophisticated treatment of Black speech.

Children in grades one through four and in special education classes take part in relay races involving balls, scooter boards, and tricycles, the fifth graders perform a square dance, grades six and seven perform an aerobics routine, and the eighth graders negotiate a circuit, which includes activities such as a rope climbs, gymnastics vaults, jump rope, and hurdling. The cheerleaders, pompons, and gymnastics team also perform routines. Students wear either the school gym uniform, or white shirts and T-shirts. The audience, comprising students, former students, parents, and teachers sits tightly packed on chairs around the

perimeter of the gym or views proceedings from the balcony. Due to the number of classes and activities, two shows take place, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Each show begins with the color guard, and then classes perform their routines in quick succession. Students pay close attention to Mrs. Tracer as she directs all activities with short, sharp commands, and as one class completes its routine and marches from the gym floor to the applause of the audience, the next class is ready to perform. At the conclusion of the second show, the principal showers the performers and Mrs. Tracer with compliments and thanks for all their hard work.

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